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# Seeing You, Seeing Me: Social Perspective-Taking as Learning

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**Seeing You, Seeing Me:  
Social Perspective-Taking as Learning**

**By Terry J. Burant & Francisco Alfonso Rios**

**Abstract**

This paper examines the use of social perspective-taking as learning in an education course in an undergraduate teacher education program. Using curriculum documents, student writing, field notes, faculty journals, and focus group interviews, the study identified the foundational/multicultural content understandings and the emotional responses that social perspective-taking activities promoted. Implications of social perspective-taking in teacher education courses and broader programmatic questions about social perspective-taking pedagogy for teaching and learning are addressed.

**Seeing You, Seeing Me:  
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The veins in Catherine's neck pulsed as she rose from her chair, raised her fist, and yelled: Wait just a minute! Is *this* what you are proposing? That *my* children, just because you think they should function solely as *your* laborers, to make boatloads of money for *your* industry, won't be educated in the same way in our city's schools as *your* children? That you are going to test them with some scientific Stanford University tool and sort them according to the station you think they will occupy in life? I don't think so!

In an introductory teacher education course, Catherine was playing the role of a Hungarian immigrant mother in an enactment of [Bigelow's](#) (1994b) *Testing, Tracking, and Toeing the Line*, a role play about the politics of schooling in the early twentieth century in the United States (US). A 19-year old teacher education candidate, she surprised even herself with her outrage. In a reflective paper, she described the complex mix of emotions this activity surfaced:

I couldn't believe that I was that overwhelmed with passion in the tracking role play. As you know, I usually don't say much in class. But, when I saw how the people in power dismissed the requests of the "regular folk" like me—the immigrants, the Black activists, and the labor movement people—and literally controlled who could speak, something snapped inside of me. I was able to get even more outraged precisely because I have the safety and the security to retreat back to my privileged position, that of a White citizen in the United States, one from a middle class background. I don't live the role; I get to take it off, to shed it afterwards.

We begin with this story to illustrate the possibilities we see in enacting a social perspective-taking curriculum and pedagogy in teacher education in ways consistent with contemporary learning principles. In teaching education, we have a substantial challenge: how do we develop and enact a curriculum that moves candidates from simple, individualistic understandings

leading to benign tolerance of difference toward deeper understandings of the systemic and structural injustices in schools and society which might, in turn, prompt them to teach in ways that facilitate socially just practices in classrooms, schools and communities? And, as important, how we do this in ways consistent with the best of what we know fosters learning. Social perspective-taking activities, such as role plays ([Bigelow](#), 1994a), interior monologues ([Christensen](#), 2000), written reflections on the imagined experiences of others, and reading and responding to narratives of the experiences of others are promising pedagogies ([Lindley & Rios](#), 2004).

### **Theoretical Foundations**

While primarily socio-constructivist perspectives on learning guide this work (e.g., learners *construct* their understandings of phenomena in the context of meaningful social relationships), we wish to highlight four related principles that most directly speak to the work of using social perspective-taking and role-playing for learning.

#### ***Learning and Teaching are Connected to and Influenced by Both the Teacher and her Students' Identities***

In recent years, the fluid and social nature of identity construction and performance has been increasingly recognized in classroom-based research (See for example, [Moje & Dillon](#), 2006). Identities are multiple, dynamic and relational ([Mendieta & Gomez-Peña](#), 2001). Yet we also recognize that there is an interdependent relationship between identity, teaching and learning ([Cummins](#), 2001). Consider how influential seeing oneself as an “artist” would be to the task of learning to paint with oils or how “being good at math” would be to the way an elementary teacher performs her role as a teacher of math. And perform these identities we do. As [Morgan](#) (2004) described it, identity *is* pedagogy in that both the teacher and student identities are negotiated and articulated in classrooms. As important, we recognize that these identities are situated within larger power dynamics (where some identities are privileged and where others are marginalized); consider how students engage in willful *not learning* when they feel that the content being taught violates the integrity of their identity ([Kohl](#), 1995). As well, identities are situated within broader national discourses around what it means to be a learner or a teacher ([Morgan](#), 2004). Consider the influence of media reports about how young people lack the knowledge and skills required for the world of work, or “reform” reports and legislative

remedies like *No Child Left Behind*, and popular press books such as [Ravitch](#)'s *Left Back* (2000), which bemoan the quality of teaching and teachers.

***Learning and Teaching are Connected to One's Ideological Orientation***

[Cochran-Smith, Davis, and Fries](#) (2004) review of research found that many candidates hold assumptions about American society that undermine their understanding of teaching as a political activity and, thereby, their ability to respond to injustice and take action. These assumptions, what [Weiner](#) (2000) described as a “seamless ideological web” of misconceptions, include the following: peoples’ culture best accounts for the problems of education; a firm belief in American meritocracy; racism and other forms of oppression are problems of the past; assimilation (cultural and linguistic) is a valued goal; and standardized tests are objective and accurate measures of what someone knows. Consider how these competing ideological positions (those advocated by teacher educators versus those held by candidates) directly impact both teaching and learning. Consequently, helping candidates learn to become “excellent multicultural and culturally responsive teachers” ([Sleeter](#), 2001, p. 94) who recognize their own sociopolitical locations, challenge inequities, engage politically, and speak up and take a stand is a persistent dilemma for teacher education primarily because it conflicts with candidates’ politically naïve ideological orientation ([Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries](#), 2004).

***Learning and Teaching Require Cognitive Engagement  
that Stems from Task Complexity***

Unfortunately, many of the current standards-based reforms have tended to focus on low levels of cognitive engagement since their evaluation is done via standardized assessments and teaching has emphasized scripted curriculums ([Au](#), 2007). This has had the exact opposite effect of what we know constitutes authentic learning. In authentic learning, task complexity, not simplicity, is the hallmark. When learners engage with tasks that are ill-defined, that require integrated and multiple knowledge bases, and that allow for multiple solutions/answers which demonstrate analysis and reflection toward action, learning is deeper ([National Research Council](#), 2000). In addition, engagement with ideas, experiences, and points of view different from those that a learner currently holds shows great promise for learning, especially critical thinking ([Clarke & Whitney](#), 2009). The learner has to actively engage with this dissonance in a way that promotes greater understanding of the complexity of phenomena ([Kapur](#), 2009). Thus while very few would argue that learning requires cognitive engagement, the depth of

engagement required for the complex tasks is often at odds with contemporary schooling practices.

***Learning and Teaching are Most Robust When They Include Physical, Social,  
and Emotional Engagement***

Cognitive science has helped us to understand much about the ways the brain works and processes information. One thing we have learned is that information is more accessible, and therefore “useable,” when it is connected ([Spector](#), 2006). These connections are often from one idea to another idea. But we also know these connections can be from modality to modality so that an idea can be connected to an action, a person, and an emotion; in fact, the neural connections made in the limbic system (the part of the brain governing emotion) during learning makes learning “a profoundly emotional activity” ([Erickson](#), 2006, p. 36). Learning is also more robust when it engages multiple senses ([Medina](#), 2008). The number and strength of these connections, then, are what determine the degree to which someone “learns” something. Thus teaching and learning that requires not only deep cognitive engagement but also bodily, relational, and emotional elements is the most robust.

We also argue that with the increasing racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in schools in the US along with threats to public education via market reforms, emphasis on rote memory based on high-stakes testing, and greater control of curriculum and pedagogy via scripted teaching, it is essential that candidates see teaching and learning as both an academic exercise but also as a political act ([Freire](#), 1998), an act of conscience. To do so, candidates need practice in seeing their own social locations, understanding and untangling complex arguments about schooling, complicating dualistic debates, understanding their own ideological positions, understanding the positions of others, determining where power lies in institutions, and seeing how they might use the power and privileges they have as teachers and citizens within a democratic system. Teacher education courses are important sites where this can happen especially when, as [Hruska](#) (2007) recommends, we (and our candidates) ask ourselves: “which ideologies, identities, and relationships are being constructed, resisted and displayed?” (p. 11).

***Learning and Social Perspective-Taking:  
Pedagogy of the Other***

Knowing that how we teach is intimately connected to what candidates learn, we believe that clarity in our pedagogy rooted in learning principles deserves greater attention. We see

teaching as a profoundly human activity; and a humanizing pedagogy ([Franquiz & Salazar, 2004](#)) used in conjunction with education content can accomplish two critical and complementary goals. First, we want candidates to understand their identities both as individuals and as members of specific social groups, to see that their views are socially situated, and then to articulate their ideological orientations, epistemological assumptions, and cultural/social locations with the understanding that these are fluid. Second, we want candidates to see the humanity in all of the students they will teach and that their students are also members of specific social groups with particular identities and ideological orientations.

These two aspects are not mutually exclusive. Learning about the multiplicity of identity and ideological positions in a society facilitates seeing the political dimension of teaching ([Nieto & Bode, 2008](#)) by exposing the layers and variety of beliefs about equality and justice vis-à-vis race and ethnicity. We agree with [Laclau and Mouffe](#) (1985) who assert that imagination and dialogue around the democratic ideal can advance a counter hegemonic ideology. It requires making the pursuit of justice a central goal in the hopes that candidates will understand (at minimum) and pursue (most idealistically) a liberatory struggle against social injustice.

### ***Narrative***

Using narrative as a humanizing pedagogical strategy fosters understanding the self and others ([Schwandt, 2001](#)). As [Connelly and Clandinin](#) (1990) explain, “Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus the story of narrative is the story of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Narrative is also useful because it captures the complexity of human phenomena as it occurs in a specific location, at a particular time, within a particular set of social relationships ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#)). Rather than seeing a narrative as a solitary, psychological account, narratives show how ironic, complex, and idiosyncratic life can be ([Coles, 1989](#)).

Narratives also provide practice in social perspective-taking: a complex developmental ability that has been associated with facilitating cognitive complexity ([Burleson & Caplan, 1998](#)). Burleson and Caplan describe the following cognitive elements as central to taking the perspective of another: identifying types of people and their probable traits; determining a person’s intentions and affective states; informing a person’s dispositional qualities; making casual attributions; forming impressions of others; retrieving information about similar people



and situations from memory; integrating these memories with new information; making inferences about the perspectives of the others; and evaluating the conduct and traits of others.

When reading, hearing, or telling stories of the “Other” in teacher education, we prefer using stories primarily of those who have been (and continue to be) marginalized. In doing so, we see another advantage. Hearing the stories of the subjugated is one way we have of challenging existing perspectives and providing alternative worldviews ([Solórzano & Yosso, 2002](#)). Besides hearing stories that contest master narratives, candidates must reconcile (dismiss, minimize, reconsider, or believe) these counter-narratives in some way. As described by [Solórzano and Yosso](#) (2002), when applied to race concerns, “Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 32). We also hope candidates will “re-author” their stories and that the narratives will stimulate greater reflexivity, encourage socially constructed views of knowledge, and provide a greater sense of possibilities for future action.

One of the critical questions we ask ourselves is what will we do in the face of really difficult, problematic situations which question our identities and our ideologies. It is helpful to know that there is a range of responses to these political and usually highly charged situations. They cut across a continuum from resistance, to negotiation, to accommodation. That is, candidates need active practice with issues of oppression, power, activism and change.

In sum, given these principles of learning, the pedagogy of the other, and the use of narratives, we assert that learning happens best when activities are student-centered and teacher-structured and which create disequilibrium in one’s thinking. While there is no recipe, we offer some general guidelines about social perspective-taking as learning: it must be active; it must engage students’ imagination; it must provide an opportunity to practice essential (negotiation) skills; it must allow people to affirm their identities while stretching them; it must provide immediate reaction as feedback; it must be situated in as realistic a context (real characters, real people) as possible; and, it must involve social interaction.

### **Method of Inquiry**

Holding these perspectives about learning and social perspective-taking in mind, we incorporated a series of curriculum events (using either role plays or narratives) into an educational foundations course with a multicultural focus. The course addresses social, historical, and philosophical foundations of education, contemporary issues in schooling,

teaching as a profession, meeting the needs of diverse learners, and other topics associated with an orthodox introduction to education course. We taught the course together in part because we each bring distinctive racial, ethnic, and gender positions to our work as teacher educators; and it is certain that these positions influence this empirical study (the questions asked, the activities chosen, the analysis conducted, etc.). Burant, a white woman from a city in the Great Lakes region of the US, previously taught in urban high schools and in an American Indian boarding school in the Southwest. Reflecting her experiences in the boarding school setting, she was particularly passionate about the role play using the issue of Indian mascots to examine institutional racism. Rios, a Latino from the mountain west region of the US, has worked to address multicultural and multilingual issues in teacher education. Hearing candidates' responses to the testimonies of people who were marginalized in school, either due to race/ethnicity or language, was important to this work. Team teaching the course, we planned together, taught together most of the time, alternated roles of leading particular activities and taking field notes and assessing candidate work.

Consistent with the learning principles describe above, we created or used dialogical activities that asked candidates to respond to reflections on the imagined experiences of others. Following the advice of [Burdell and Swadener](#) (1999), we also “[sought] texts that allow[ed] us to enter the world of others in ways that [had] us more present in their experience while better understanding our own” (p. 21). Mindful of the developmental nature of social perspective-taking, we created and/or enacted five major social perspective-taking curriculum events (See Table 1) throughout the semester and studied candidates' experiences and reactions to the events.

**Table 1**  
**Social Perspective Events**

<i>Title</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Auto-ethnography Project</i>	<i>Candidates read an autobiography or memoir about someone or several people different from themselves, participated in book group discussions, wrote an essay comparing and contrasting their lives with the lives of those represented in their book, and presented part of their work in a multi-genre presentation. Books included: Greg Michie's (1999) <i>Holler if you hear me</i>; Luis Urrea's (1993) <i>Across the Wire</i>; Mike Rose's (1989) <i>Lives on the Boundary</i>; and, bell hook's (1997) <i>Bone Black</i>.</i>
<i>Little Rock Nine Role Play</i>	<i>Candidates were provided with a brief history of the Little Rock Nine's efforts to integrate that city's school system. Students assumed the role of various participants and were given a few minutes to “get into</i>

	<p>character” and consider what they would want people to know about their perspective. A television reporter then interviewed each character/group. Each was “grilled” about their role and purpose for participating in the event. This role-play is situated in a description of definitions and levels of racism: racism, prejudice, and scapegoating at individual, institutional, societal, and civilizational levels (Scheurich &amp; Young, 1997). In debriefing the role-play, the definitions and levels of racism were revisited with examples of where and when they were evident.</p>
<p><i>Testing, Tracking, and Toeing the Line: A Role Play on the Origins of the Modern High School</i> (Bigelow, 1994b, p. 114-124).</p>	<p>This role-play enacts the political struggles associated with the origin of high schools in the United States and questions the taken for granted, commonplace practices of schooling. Candidates were assigned one of five roles: corporate executive, middle class citizen, Black activist, member of the radical labor union (the Industrial Workers of the World), and Hungarian immigrant. The activity began with reading about the roles, getting in character, preparing to meet the new superintendent in a community forum, and negotiating with the other groups about common goals for public education in their community. One of the instructors played the role of a newly hired superintendent and delivered a speech (with no discussion allowed) about new school reforms to be enacted. These included testing, tracking, and “Americanization” reforms. Afterwards a community meeting was held to react to the superintendent’s reforms. The activity ended with a whole-class debriefing.</p>
<p><i>In Whose Honor? Film and Interior Monologue</i></p>	<p>After reviewing levels of racism, the class viewed the film <i>In Whose Honor?</i> (Rosenstein, 1996). The documentary examines Charlene Teters’ struggle with the University of Illinois over the Chief Illiniwek mascot. As a graduate student, Spokane woman, and mother, Charlene’s story illuminates institutional and cultural racism, as well as the role of mascots and sports teams in schools. After viewing the film, students wrote an “interior monologue” (Christensen, 2000) highlighting the perspective of someone represented in the film.</p>
<p><i>Lily, Victor and their Teachers Role Play</i></p>	<p>This perspective-taking activity comes from a videotaped interview with Lily-Wong Filmore (University of California Professor of Bilingual Education) and Victor Villasenor (writer of the Mexican-American epic <i>Rain of Gold</i>). They both describe the misunderstandings, isolation, and hurt they felt as students as their home languages and cultures were dishonored in schools. After the video, the candidates wrote letter to an imaginary teacher as if they were either Victor or Lily. They started the letter with: “Dear Teacher: If only you knew...” After they wrote their letters, they were randomly distributed back to other students who were then asked to imagine themselves, now as a teacher, going to their mailbox, and receiving this letter. They were asked to describe what they would think, feel, and do.</p>

We began with these questions:

- 1.) How do candidates experience social perspective-taking curriculum as a series of events in an education course?
- 2.) What perspectives do candidates take when engaged in social perspective-taking curriculum events?
- 3.) What content do candidates learn or resist learning via social perspective-taking?

We used data from the 16 candidates who provided IRB consent, out of the 22 students in the course, for this analysis. The candidates (4 male, 12 female) were traditional-aged (18-23 years old) university students, White, and from the front range region of the Rocky Mountains or nearby western Plains states.

The previously cited portrait of culturally insular and politically naïve teacher candidates is further complicated by the rural western backgrounds of most of the participants in this study, as well as the politically conservative location of our work: a college of education at a public university in the Rocky Mountains. While a great deal of complexity lies beneath a summary description of the political and ideological leanings of the candidates in this study, it is important to acknowledge how local factors complicate learning in teacher education courses. The majority of the candidates came from small towns or rural ranches, all were White, and several remarked that they have “never seen a real Black person except on television” before coming to the university. Their prior experiences reflected what might be called a “wild west” ideological orientation. In descriptions of their previous schooling experiences, they often referenced naming sports teams with cowboy and Indian mascots, sorting students by vocational-technical, agricultural and college preparation tracks, celebrating Christian holidays in public schools, and English-only instruction. A belief in equality of opportunity and the ideal of making it on one’s own in an independent, western spirit were repeatedly expressed in papers and class discussions.

To examine experiences with social perspective-taking, we collected data throughout the entire spring semester, from January to June. Data sources included: field notes from social perspective-taking events, teaching journals and emails kept by both instructors, candidate papers on each social perspective-taking activity, and focus group interviews conducted at the end of the semester. Candidate papers on the events followed a relatively simple format

addressing what it was like to participate, to take a particular role or perspective, and what was learned from participation.

Informed by constructivist/interpretive perspectives ([Denzin & Lincoln, 1994](#)), we began analysis by initially examining the candidates' written reports about their participation in the five social perspective-taking events. We sorted these reports by activity and individually searched for "meaning units" ([Ely, 1991](#)) by noting key words, patterns, and possible relationships between recurring ideas. Next, we traded reports, continued coding, and discussed trends in the data while using notes from our teaching journals and emails to better understand the particular events. Then, we sorted the data into three broad categories that captured the kinds of understandings that social perspective-taking generated. Next, we noted patterns (i.e. which particular curriculum event was associated with particular kinds of understandings and how understandings shifted from one event to the next and so on). One of us transcribed the focus group data and coded it for the same categories of understandings, as well as for suggestions that candidates generated about using social perspective-taking.

Researching teacher education practice within the parameters of one particular course presents limitations for interpretation. Examining learning via social perspective-taking over time would provide a more complete picture of the development of this skill over the course of a teacher education program. Further, in an accountability-oriented educational context, candidates may overstate or misrepresent learning in order to earn a grade. While the study is also limited by focusing on a small number of candidates in one course, the fact that we taught the course and researched candidates' experiences with the curriculum and pedagogy as a team and questioned one another in analysis lends strength to these interpretations.

### **Interpretations**

Candidates articulated understandings about the following: 1) individual perspectives, 2) context of individuals' experiences, and 3) critique and/or action. We also include instances where the narrative and social perspective-taking activities hindered learning.

### **Individual Perspectives**

Consistent with the dominant value orientation in the US, as well as the nature of the task (i.e., asking candidates to actually take the perspective of an individual), candidates overwhelmingly expressed individual ideological orientations in response to the social perspective-taking activities. As evident in the opening excerpt, most participants articulated,

with varying measures of complexity, compassion, and sophistication, the imagined perspectives of the individual “others” whose role they played. After reading [Urrea's](#) (1993) *Across the Wire*, one candidate explained, “I now can imagine what it might be like to be a poor person without any clear way of getting out of poverty, something I never considered before as I’ve always had enough to eat and a place to sleep.”

As in many other situations where people note difference (such as traveling or studying abroad, etc.), when candidates looked at the world from the perspective of another they often looked back at themselves to notice their own biases and assumptions. One candidate described awareness of her own xenophobia: “I realized through reading [bell hooks'](#) story that I used to have a negative view of foreigners.” Another mentioned how she was forced to confront what she had normalized saying, “I thought all people came from perfect and loving families like mine. Now I see my family a little differently. What is perfect anyway?” In one instance, looking through the eyes of another became a source of strength. This candidate states: “I can see how hardship made bell [hooks] stronger and this made me look at some of my own hardships (especially the death of my mother) and see that they made me stronger too.”

One of the most powerful activities was the letter-writing activity in which candidates reacted to Lily Wong-Fillmore's reflections on how her home language and culture was devalued at school creating feelings of disconnection for her and her family. Many candidates made connections between Lily's experiences and their own in which those in power in schools marginalized their family members. Many lamented Lily's loss, imagining how awful they would feel if their family ties were threatened.

However, given the focus on diversity and social justice in the course, we were especially interested in those instances wherein this looking back included attending to their own identities, their own cultural and gendered locations: “I began to see that I might need to develop more pride in my own ethnic cultures—Italian and Jewish,” and “While I did not have much in common with [bell hooks](#), by thinking about her life and looking at my own from her eyes, I saw how my being a female in a very male-dominated field—agricultural education—was related to bell's oppression as a woman.”

Many candidates were able to identify aspects of their own identity, including their racial and class privilege, after engaging in social perspective-taking. For example, after the tracking role play, one student wrote, “I realized my own safety. I could go back to my world and retreat.

The person I was playing did not have that luxury.” Related to seeing privilege, candidates sometimes mentioned the way in which they now felt “ashamed” or embarrassed to “know how cruel humans can be.” Regarding the advantages of social class in overcoming obstacles, one candidate compared her brother’s circumstances to those of Tavares, a young man Greg Michie (1999) wrote about in *Holler if You Hear Me*:

My brother was put in low-level classes because he doesn’t do well in the usual textbook environment. He is an extremely smart person who, when given an activity relevant to his life, becomes very involved and interested in school. Like Tavares, most teachers passed him off as stupid and he began to care less and less. Once Tavares got to high school, he couldn’t escape the stereotypes put upon him and he got involved with drugs and left school. Sadly, my brother did the same thing. They both started to believe what the schools were indirectly teaching them: they were worth nothing and would amount to nothing. Due to the fact that my parents are middle class and have more resources to deal with my brother’s problems, there is a greater chance for my brother to succeed.

Another began to see her family’s economic position differently:

In [Luis Urrea’s](#) *Across the Wire*, I had a hard time identifying with the people in the book. I guess my angle would be instead how much I do not identify with these people. I did not grow up in a rich neighborhood by any means, but compared to what these people have, I look back at how “rich” we really were.

While there are definite limitations when trying to see the world through another’s eyes, attempting to do so generated a greater recognition that we all see the world through culturally and socially situated frameworks and, in this case, these lenses of relative privilege make it all the harder to see the perspectives of people who are marginalized. One participant pointed out that privilege is a powerful barrier to more complete understanding stating, “I saw how much my own views are limited precisely because I am a member of the dominant society. I have the privilege to be ignorant!” For some, acknowledgement of privilege became a motivator to “keep learning about views and experiences other than my own.”

Some of the roles, however, were quite difficult for candidates to understand and generated simplistic conjectures about that particular experience. For example, after playing Elizabeth Eckford in the desegregation of Little Rock High School role play, one candidate

wrote, “I found it difficult to play this role. This girl was crazy to enter such a hostile environment.” Another difficult perspective that was that of Charlene Teters and American Indian groups arguing against the use of Indian mascots in sports and in schools. A number of papers contained “get over it” comments. One used a tentative and disconnected voice to argue about intent as an excuse for effect, “These images are probably not meant to convey a racist or discriminatory message. It is possible to see that the use of these images might offend some people even though they aren’t intended to do so.” Another argued that it is important for all of us to “be patriotic and to love America no matter what background you come from.”

Some comments reflected outright hostility to difference. In reaction to Lily’s story about being a second language learner in school, one argued, “that being American is being white and English is the official language of America,” while another argued that his “job as a teacher is not to teach English—until you can speak, stay home.”

### **Context of Individuals’ Experiences**

An important aim of teacher education is to help candidates see schooling in more complex ways, especially through a socio-political lens with respect to understanding how macro-level constructs—school structures, social ideologies, and other social systems—work against equity and social justice. Thus, we report here instances where candidates were able to “see” racism and other macro-level forms of injustice. We report instances where candidates see how politics, privilege and the social reproduction of schooling are manifested. We include negative instances where candidates denied or explained away these macro-level phenomena.

### **Seeing Racism**

For many of the candidates in this study, race and racism were disconnected from both their experiences and consciousness. As one candidate commented, “I had no idea about race before this class. I mean, I know that sounds naïve, but I just didn’t think about it.” Through social perspective-taking, some candidates gained a greater understanding of the role of race and racism in schooling. In reflecting on the events at Little Rock, one candidate wrote, “I now see that racism is a much larger concept than just two people; many are involved and play a large part in discrimination.” Another explained:

I never really thought about how much racism there is in the world. I never thought about seeing millions of white dolls on the shelves and very few if any dolls of color or the color of ‘flesh’ on a crayon being the color of a white



person's skin. The book [*Bone Black*] helped open my eyes and helped give me an understanding of how a minority might feel in everyday situations. I have a greater understanding of how racist our nation really is even though we try to pretend it's equal.

Some candidates reported seeing how racism is perpetuated. One candidate explained, "From reading *Bone Black*, I now have a clearer understanding about the actual teaching of racism...and I don't understand how we teach kids things that we know will hurt them." Her remarks also exhibited an elementary understanding of hegemony as she commented on the role that some of hooks' relatives and Black peers played in reinforcing the inferiority of the "darker-skinned Blacks in their words and actions."

### ***Seeing Politics, Privilege, and Social Reproduction of Schooling***

The most potent example of candidates' understanding how local politics matters in schooling occurred during a candidate-orchestrated project rather than one we designed. In this instance, a small group of candidates, presenting a class project on the impact of local school boards on school curriculum and policies, created and facilitated a role play. At this point in the course, candidates had already participated in three social perspective-taking activities. Field notes describe the event:

Greg, using a forceful, loud voice, played the role of the superintendent at a community forum where a new reform movement was introduced to the public. The reform was the result of a recent landslide vote that made the school board politically and religiously conservative. The proposed reforms included abolishing sex education, censoring science teachers in teaching about evolution, establishing modest and restrictive school uniforms, and enforcing mandatory, random drug testing and locker searches. The members of the group assigned roles for the rest of the class to assume including those of: radically religious conservative community members and church leaders, parents in favor of sex education, business owners, students, parents with children who already had problems with drug use, etc. Almost immediately, heated arguments erupted between interest groups. No longer a simple question and answer session between the district representatives and the public, the role-played meeting became a volatile exchange of conflicting values and expectations for public schooling.

This candidate-generated role play complemented [Bigelow's](#) (1994b) role play in illustrating how politics influence school practices and policies. By living others' experiences in Bigelow's tracking role play, one participant saw that:

Those in power have insider knowledge about what's going on. I mean, they were in on the search committee for the superintendent and they picked him precisely because he represented their interests. Those in power also controlled what is heard and what is even allowed to be said.

For most candidates, these two role play activities, as well as some of the narratives, disturbed previously unquestioned assumptions about equality and individual opportunity. By feeling the rage of inequity and seeing how power keeps those with privilege in preferential positions, some realized the connection between power and voice. They explained that it was "easy to speak with power," alluding to the ways social power is concentrated in specific locations and how those in power structure the settings and protocol for speaking. One candidate explained how she continued to use an inner voice of privilege even as she played the role of someone without it, a member of the Black community at Little Rock High School, "It was only a role play so I knew deep down that I have this safety of being a white American. It was easy then to become enraged and be more outspoken as a minority in this situation than I imagine people were in that time and place."

Others began to see how the larger society and its rules and institutions impact the lives of families today. Comparing her life with that of [bell hooks](#), a participant carefully analyzed her family and suggested possible linkages to race, class and education:

My family is sort of spread out all over and we only see each other on holidays while hooks' family saw one another and relied on and cared about one another. Perhaps this shows how many Black families are close and rely on one another. Maybe if you are poor, you don't get as good of an education and then the women in the family don't move too far so the families stay close. White middle class families generally get a better education and have everything on their side so their fear of moving away is less. They know they will be respected wherever they move unlike Blacks who are still not welcome in many neighborhoods. Whites get better jobs and are more able to be independent and move from their families.

### ***Not Understanding/Excusing***

For some candidates, their own experiences with schooling or their political ideologies hindered their willingness to consider how institutional power might function in denying educational opportunities. For example, after the tracking role play one participant argued that “yes, there were tracks in my high school but the people in the vocational-technical and agricultural tracks chose their tracks. No one made them take those routes.”

History was also frequently mentioned as a reason why they were not able to “get into” the situations and scenes of the roles they were asked to play. This was particularly true for the Little Rock and the tracking role plays. Candidates wrote things like “it was difficult to put myself back to a time where people would’ve behaved that way, in ways that are now shunned.” Another candidate explained, “I grew up in an age when Blacks were everywhere—schools, businesses, etc... so the idea that a Black girl wasn’t allowed in a school is unbelievable to me.”

While understanding the social and political context of a particular event was possible for many candidates, often these understandings were accompanied by resignation. For example, in the Little Rock Nine role play one candidate, who played the role of an “average American” listening to the event on the news, described how “just like the Columbine High School shootings in our area, they happened...but, what can you do? I mean, I found myself getting angry at the crowd and the Governor, but again, there’s nothing you can do.” Another candidate mentioned that if she were Elizabeth Eckford, “I would’ve just walked away and said, ‘the heck with this.’” Taking action also was explained as something “extraordinary people” do. As one candidate wrote after the Little Rock role play, “it’s one thing to be against this, but it is difficult to think that I would’ve been courageous enough to do something.” Others glorified Elizabeth as an “amazing” and “brave” and “strong” girl doing something that “I could not have done.”

### ***Critique and/or Action***

Early in the semester, taking action typically referred to acting in their individual imaginary classrooms in the future. One participant noted that “as an educator I think I have some power to strengthen ties with families with activities like family reading projects, interviews with parents or family members, family history projects and to carefully think about the different meanings of family my students might have.” After reading *Holler if You Hear Me*

([Michie](#), 1999), one candidate stated her intention to practice reflection in order to honor difference and to learn about the children in her classroom:

Every student in this book expressed that the reason they do not do well in school or they reason they don't like it is because the teachers do not listen to them. Although I might have very different experiences from the children I teach, by listening to what's going on in their lives I can begin to understand a little more about why they do what they do. This might sound naïve, but this book inspired me to want to get involved with students' lives.

Another reframed her goals for teaching:

I realize that my original goals for becoming a teacher have not changed; however, they are more imperative than I thought. I want to teach not only math, science, and reading but also help children develop a positive sense of who they are. I want children to learn respect for others, confidence in themselves and in the human race. I think it is important that children are not only allowed to dream and explore but for teachers to help expand students' imagination.

While there was very little suggestion of possible actions that could be taken to mitigate the effects of institutional and individual forms of oppression, participants suggested more action as the semester went on. The final social perspective-taking activity—the Victor and Lily film and letter writing activity—elicited the most specific suggestions for action beyond the classroom. Some used their letters as vehicles to argue for “inclusion of bilingual education in my school” while others suggested that teachers “learn culturally relevant second language learning strategies to employ in their classrooms.”

Those that suggested action frequently mentioned the connection between power and voice. Recalling the tracking role play, one participant wrote, “As executives, we were heard a lot more. We got to speak first and last at the public forum and the forum was clearly structured for our purposes.” With this knowledge, candidates realized the need for those with power to use their voices to speak up against oppression. One participant put it this way, “As a white American, I need to use my voice. Before, I did not know that my voice came with a certain kind of power; now, I see that it does and I have a responsibility now to use it.”

## **Discussion**

We found great variability in responses to the five activities we used. We begin by discussing the least successful of the activities and illuminate possible explanations; then, we turn to the ways in which social perspective taking functioned as learning. The role play about the desegregation of Little Rock High School and the imagined responses of those involved in the struggle to rid the University of Illinois of its Indian mascot portrayed in the film *In Whose Honor* ([Rosenstein](#), 1996) were the least productive. The events at Little Rock seemed too long ago for many of the candidates. The actions of Indian activists and the examples of institutional and cultural racism in Indian mascots were also easily dismissed. Particular roles within otherwise “successful” role plays, such as the socialists in [Bigelow’s](#) (1994b) role play about the origin of the American high school, did not generate candidates’ enthusiasm for the activity. Yet, a role play created by a group of candidates to understand power in local schooling engaged everyone present that day.

Reflecting on the unevenness of candidate responses to the role plays, we found that it is important to carefully consider and build on background knowledge—both about the content and the context of the course and of the larger social and political (historically and contemporarily) world. If this knowledge is limited, as one participant explained, “It is difficult to participate without something of substance to contribute.” This was particularly true of the role of a socialist activist since the term “socialist” was often confused with “communist” and kept turning candidates off to even considering socialist ideals given lack of attention to the historical context and the impact of socialist ideals in the early twentieth century in the US.

We have also come to understand that the specific geographic, political, and social locations where such activities take place have an impact on enactment. Learning about oppression through the lens of a particular Other may be successful or not depending on how the issue resonates in a specific location and how familiar one is with the circumstances of the group(s) under consideration, even if actual contact is limited. For example, the greatest resistance to the perspectives of another group occurred when we showed the documentary *In Whose Honor* ([Rosenstein](#), 1996) depicting the struggle to ban the use of Indian mascots for sports teams. In a location like the west, a “cowboy” culture is deeply embedded and shows up in the names and logos of local businesses, in classroom practices like “circling the wagons” (to gather together in a tight circle), and in prevailing narratives about independence and “winning

the West.” Further, for many of the candidates, specific Native American tribes in the region were some of the few communities of color that they did have some prior contact with, perhaps just enough to develop stereotypes and misconceptions. While it is important to include knowledge about racial and ethnic groups that are in close proximity to an institution, we wonder if perspective taking, particularly in early courses, might be more beneficial when it centers on the experiences of groups that do not necessarily live in the immediate surroundings. Familiarity may, in fact, breed contempt ([Rios, Trent & Castaneda, 2003](#)), at least in the initial stages of learning about the implications of racism and power in education.

We learned that social perspective-taking activities must occur in relationship to previous classroom events and curriculum and then carefully placed in the overall course schedule. We miscalculated our candidates’ readiness for Bigelow’s tracking role play when we enacted it on first day back after spring break.

As sometimes happens with multicultural content, there is the chance that candidates feel defeated and hopeless after experiencing these events. For example, one of the participants lamented that “schooling is tainted” while another explained that “it is hopeless to act against such powerful interests and not much can be done.” Thus, it is important to actively search for and use stories of people engaged in the intense self-reflection that leads to transformation, particularly those who come from backgrounds similar to those of the candidates we teach including those who engage in “every day” activism via a spirit of collaboration in order to guard against perpetuating heroic tales.

This pedagogy also took some getting used to and we learned to build on candidate experience. The first two social perspective-taking activities in the class resulted in very little understanding of individuals’ perspectives and related contextual factors generating short responses about possible perspectives. Particularly in the narrative papers, many candidates had difficulty expressing how their own racial, ethnic, social class, or gender identities mattered in their lives. After three or four perspective taking events, however, most candidates more clearly articulated understandings about the identities and ideologies they hold as individuals and as members of particular social groups. Perhaps they came to value their imaginations with the result being more detailed and specific connections between the activity and course content. With each successive event, our field notes indicated greater overall participation and more

explicit emotion expressed in class, although some candidates did not prefer these activities at all, even though they saw value in them for their learning.

Relative to learning, using social perspective-taking events contributed to building relationships between the candidates in our course. As one participant in a focus group explained, “We learned a lot about one another because we interacted a lot over the course of the semester. We became a close class because we did all this acting in front of one another.”

When particular events stimulated great emotional displays in class, the level of empathy and impetus for action was also heightened. After the tracking role play, for example, one participant explained, “I had no idea what life is like not to be privileged. My blood pressure is about 350 points higher right now. I can just begin to feel what it is like to be discriminated.” Another explained how role plays in class created greater cognitive engagement and did not allow him to “tune out” like he admitted he often does in classes that rely on lecture and note-taking; he “had to engage” and it made him “get to know people too.” Unleashing the power of emotion to understand content was an important finding.

We also learned that adequate debriefing time, as one stated, for “separating the message from the messenger” is also critical for the success of role plays, particularly when candidates are to assume roles portraying discriminatory behaviors. In our case, several candidates explained how they “left class angry with others” after heated debates. While emotional safety and freedom from discomfort is never a given in any classroom, negotiating peer relationships when the structure of the events in class intentionally creates conflict may be especially challenging.

### **Questions for Learning and Teaching in Teacher Education**

This study raised several programmatic questions for us as teacher educators. During a time when teacher education is increasingly devalued and limited time is devoted to educational foundations courses, what are the critical incidents in the history of public education in the United States that are important for candidates to experience via emotionally engaging pedagogy? Related to this question, we wonder where social perspective-taking activities should take place over the range of teacher education experiences. As we observed candidates becoming more comfortable with the ambiguity of social perspective-taking and the fluidity of history, we realized that social perspective-taking activities may serve as an important staging ground for later use of case-based methodology in teacher education ([Anasi Seguin & Abrosio](#) 2002; note

also that many teacher exams such as the Praxis II use case-based assessment methodologies). Social perspective-taking may also be useful for the development of reflective capacities in candidates. Cultivating the habits of mind that encourage candidates to see multiple possibilities and courses of action is an important role for teacher education courses.

When enacting any pedagogical approach that has a specific focus, we also wonder about what is not addressed, a fact not lost on our students. Several participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that they did not learn to “write lesson plans” (even though the course deliberately focused on “schooling” and not “teaching”). One candidate said:

I know that multicultural education is important no matter where I teach; yet, I need to know more about how to do it. We need to know how to turn all these big ideas like multicultural education, and making your classroom more political and social activist and more democratic a reality.

Yet we noticed that participants actually did learn, in small measure, how to teach by paying close attention to the structure of social perspective-taking activities. Several wrote and talked about how they might use role-playing in their classrooms when they become teachers. In addition, most of the candidates incorporated role-playing in group projects as part of course requirements. As previously mentioned, one candidate-generated role play was highlighted in each of the focus groups recounting specific perspective taking events. Candidate-led activities also used letters from the perspectives of others, and interior monologues in other projects.

Oftentimes, teacher educators bemoan the emphasis that candidates typically place on learning “how to teach.” Reflecting on the incorporation of social perspective-taking in their own projects, we are reminded of the positive aspects of candidates’ interests in learning “pedagogical tricks of the trade” ([Goodlad](#), 1990, p. 225). Because of this over-riding concern, many added social perspective-taking to their beginning repertoires of pedagogies, providing some confirmation about the potential power of teacher education. This copying reiterates the fact that all teacher education courses are indeed methods courses ([Hamilton](#), 1998); and, if we seek to have our candidates create and use engaging and critical curriculum and pedagogy in their classes, we must incorporate these practices to our teacher education courses. We also feel that it would be even stronger if we had situated these social perspective-taking events within the framework of principles for learning described earlier in this paper.



Additionally, specifically related to social perspective-taking as learning, we have come to understand the following:

- Candidates can (indeed, like to) engage in “democratic imagination” (both emotionally and cognitively) of the other;
- Candidates strive to make sense of alternative perspectives and often seek similarity in difference;
- While candidates can engage in imaginary action, we are uncertain it will transfer to action in the event that similar instances of injustice that might occur contemporarily;
- Social perspective-taking can “make real” for candidates the role of ethnicity, racism, prejudice and the struggle for justice; and,
- Self-reflection is an important outcome for candidates especially when they come to recognize both their biases and their privileges.

Taking the perspective of another person is more than a simple lesson in empathy and understanding. Rather, its power lies in its potential to reveal the complexities of any phenomena including, in this instance, the larger societal forces that create, reinforce, and perpetuate inequity and injustice. Instances like this (confronting a surprise which causes one to reflect/critique one’s own assumptions and the larger social structures that create and sustain injustice) present powerful occasions for deeper learning about realities of injustice and the need for consistent efforts towards anti-racist, social justice educational experiences. By imagining the experiences of either a real or imagined “other” from a different social location, candidates may shift ideological orientations from an individually-based politics of difference towards a more critically reflective, civic responsibility stance, developing and using their voices in the larger political arenas where decisions about schooling are made.

In conclusion, learning occurs about social perspective-taking and from social perspective-taking. Social perspective-taking can indeed serve *as* learning.

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